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Edible Negros

by

Unique Fair-Smith

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for
The Degree of Master of Fine Arts in Studio Arts

School of Art
College of Art and Design

Rochester Institute of Technology
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Thesis Abstract

Edible Negros is an exploration of western consumerism and its impact on African-Americans. The thesis grapples with the oppression African-Americans have systematically experienced within capitalist and consumerist society and our collective struggles toward liberation.

This analysis goes further to study the western world's consumption of the black body, how African-Americans have been abused as a commodity; and as an overall examination of the western world's dependence on both the metaphorical and literal consumption of our bodies through labor exploitation, physical mutilation, and cannibalism.

Furthermore, the investigation encompasses how the perception and value of African-American lives has transitioned. This includes a focus on the fields of science, politics, labor, and culture over the centuries as an acute observation of the impact of commodification, and how it plays a fundamental role in shaping the humanity and identity of African-Americans.

The artwork, a series of black figure paintings and portraits, convey the dissonance of existing in a world that consumes you. And confronts the viewer with questions that lead to potentially uneasy, and revolutionary answers.

Thesis Introduction

Within a year, the United States lost over 500,000 lives to the COVID-19 virus, and a disproportionate amount of those lost have been African-Americans. As the death tolls rise, and containment becomes more challenging, our leaders are pushing for a return to normalcy. Consequently, “essential” workers across the nation are required to work in unsafe conditions. These positions are disproportionately held by African-Americans, and as we continue to be coerced into fighting on the front lines of the pandemic our government has failed to contain, it becomes clear that we are not essential, but sacrificial.

This turmoil exposes the fundamentally exploitative nature of capitalism in stark relief, as an economic system whose success and expansion is contingent on the exploitation of labor. Capitalists use the oppressed as a means of gaining wealth, exposing them to dangerous and deadly conditions. This is especially evident in the African-American experience. For centuries, western advancements in practically every endeavor have always come at the expense of Black lives, it has propelled itself forward from our bloody backs from the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade to the modern prison industrial complex, and now as fodder in the pandemic.

Since the United States has only valued our lives when they are consumed for its benefit, our history as African-Americans has been shaped over the centuries by both the abuse inflicted upon every generation, and each generation's resistance against being consumed. Using the Fine Arts to develop a dynamic theory about exploitation within is critical to improving the quality of life for the African-American community, and the wider working class.

The reality of the black body used as a tool or means, rekindled a childhood memory. When I was young, my mother and I frequented art galleries, and I remembered this feeling of dissociation with the black faces I would see, if I saw any, in the paintings presented. They felt severed and untethered to their own identity and humanity. As I develop as an artist, I feel compelled to correct this. These feelings led me to the current thesis: *Edible Negros*, a series of oil paintings depicting black figures that grapple with the nature of western capitalism and consumerism.

Research that centers on how artists can grapple with these oppressive systems as a means to empower our communities is a necessary step in replacing them with systems that meet the needs of every citizen. Historically, the importance of art has been critical to the advancement of civil rights, as documented by Nicolas Lampert in their book *A People's Art History of the United States*, "When artists join movements, their work... and by extension their lives... takes on a far greater meaning. They become agitators in the best sense of the word and their art becomes less about the individual and more about the common visions and aspirations of many. Their art becomes part of a culture of resistance."

The history of exploitation is especially important to my body of work. I am against the systematic exploitation inherent within the capitalist economic system. I have an interest in wielding my art as activism to improve the communities around me and empower people to engage politically with society. It is vital to my continued growth and academic research that I develop a complex and potent theory about exploitation, and use my art to explore potential answers that empower the working class.

This thesis requires research into the nuances of African-American history throughout the centuries, specifically the history of Black exploitation, to inform my ideation. This includes discredited and inaccurate sources that I disagree with, but use as a frame of reference to understand the rationalizations behind the traumas inflicted on African-Americans. This is because our physical exploitation was extended beyond labor, as many fields of science like gynecology, genetics, STD research, and the pseudoscience of eugenics found unwilling and non-consenting victims within the Black community.

Methodology of Process

A primary interest in my research is the social impact of activist art, and how it plays a major role in shifting public opinion and political movements. Throughout the research and preparation for my thesis, I found artists whose work and theory directly inspire my work. The earliest inspiration came from Emory Douglas, the Minister of Culture for the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. As the BPP began to gain momentum, Emory Douglas was recruited to develop the party's newspaper. In *People's Art History of the United States*, Nicolas Lampert documents that Douglas' new role made him responsible for "creating the images, graphics, posters, and visual iconography for the BPP, along with the layout, design, and overall production of the weekly newspaper." The artwork of Douglas quickly became a vital aspect of spreading the party's message.

An interesting element of Douglas' work was his ability to adapt his art to meet the needs of the party. As the party shifted their focus towards community service programs such

as free breakfast programs, health clinics, free clothing and legal aid programs, Douglas's art transitioned to represent that change. As Nicholas Lampert documents in *People's Art History of the United States*, in the later years of the paper's publication, "Douglas's images... reflected a shift in the BPP policy, by the spring of 1971, guns were close to absent in his images." Douglas himself acknowledged this change, "My art was a reflection of the politics of the party, so when the party changed to community action so did my art, from pigs to kids." Douglas' effective propaganda is inspiring because of its phenomenal accessibility, and it is his simplification of his concepts that I found most insightful as I developed this thesis.

Another artist who influenced me was Jacob Lawrence. I was deeply moved by his "Great Migration" series, a 60 panel progression that detailed the migration of African Americans from the southern states to the northern states in the early to mid 1900's. This body of work tells a sequential narrative about the attempt to escape bigotry and pursue happiness and each of the 60 panels are necessary to tell the complete story. The images compel the viewer to engage on a personal level with the work, and grapple with the struggles of those he represented.

This series resonated with my work and during my time working on my Bachelors in Illustration, comics and other sequential narrative techniques became my favorite means of communicating with the viewer. I wanted to use the same narrative power to create an atmosphere for my paintings that told the story of consumerism.

Early into my thesis, I considered developing a large series of sequential panels similar to Lawrence's work, however I realized that wouldn't best represent my goal. I don't require a large sprawling narrative between my paintings to depict the exploitive relationship between the

Black community and consumerism. That unease could be captured within a series, however, it did not have to be one where each painting needed to be viewed in a specific viewing order. Additionally, with the limitations of Covid-19, I realized that the scope of dozens of paintings would be beyond what I could showcase. This resulted in my concept transitioning from a large single narrative, into a smaller more specific format.

From the beginning of my thesis, I expected myself to develop work that encompassed every element of my experience as a graduate student. My mind was overflowing with ideas involving paintings I that would print on, prints that I would paint on, 3D printing, sculpture, technology and other deviations from the traditional artistic methods. Ironically, it became consuming; I found myself stretching to fit every practice, method, permutation and abomination I could think of into my thesis. These insightful explorations where ultimately whittled down into something more straightforward and more succinct in scope.

One of my explorations was replicating the oil painting technique of glazing with water-soluble oil paints. I spent months trying to replicate the visual effects glazed layers achieve with a mixture of mediums and solvents. After multiple attempts and damaged paintings, I managed to develop a mixture of mediums that allowed me to glaze effectively. However, I found that the next hurdle was the drying time of each glazing layer. Each layer took at least a week to dry, which prevented me from developing successive glazing layers without spending weeks on each painting. This brought me to alkyd oil paints, another variant of oil paints that dry within 24 hours. Using alkyds, I was able to glaze, using a painting method that starts with alkyd oil paints, and combines them with fast drying mediums to accelerate the drying time. Ultimately, my final paintings do not incorporate glazing, but grappling with this, and finding success with this process had a tremendous impact on my

entire series of paintings, encouraging me to paint efficiently and confidently.

The processes of developing new techniques and applications of mediums has been central to my work since my undergraduate education. My experience has been that each new skill expands my understanding of my other skills, and refines my perspective on every other technique I use. In time, the incorporation of these new methods improves my artwork's potency with the viewer. However, my thesis team and I realized that I became so stuck on trying to figure out the conceptual element of my thesis that I overlooked my ability as a painter. My overanalysis of conceptual and technical elements was hindering me from exploring those themes naturally as I developed the work. In response to this, my team encouraged me to paint anything that would inspire me during the winter break. From there I would assess not only what mediums and methods best compliment me, but also develop paintings that center on which subjects appeal the most to me.

The result was a series of daily figure paintings of African-American models. For ten days, I woke up and painted a single figure. I limited myself to only 3 hours each to avoid perseverating over each detail, and ultimately ended up with work that captured the spectrum of my emotions and curiosities. After taking some time to reflect on this, my thesis shifted to a focus on the figure painting of Black bodies.

This idea of the Black body used as a prop or tool, rekindled a childhood memory. When I was young, my mother and I frequented art galleries, and I remembered this feeling of dissociation with the black faces I would see, if I saw any, in the paintings presented. They felt untethered to identity and humanity. As I develop as an artist, I feel compelled to correct this.

These feelings led me to the current thesis. *Edible Negros*, a series of oil paintings depicting black figures that grapple with the nature of western capitalism and consumerism.

Consumerism as a subject came to me in part because of my dissonance with brand culture. Concepts like brand loyalty to the point of profiling others based on what sneakers or belts they wear is problematic to me. I find many people close to me and within my wider community obsessed with brand names for the social clout that wearing the logo brings them, not the quality of the product or its function. My real interest was in understanding what branding means within the Black Community especially in light of its horrific historic significance to my ancestors.

Over the months of development, I considered several ways of conveying these questions in the final paintings. At first, I approached the idea from the angle of interpretation; the paintings would simply have popular logos painted to look like brands on the flesh of my figures. This led me to consider simulating the burns and uneven skin caused by branding flesh. Initially, I began to explore engraving into the wood panels I paint onto, and partially filling them with colored resin and gum arabic to approximate the damage of burns. After several attempts and experiments, I began to practice burning parts of finished paintings. I believed this would hold a visceral impact on the viewer, as they can see the literal burns on the painting, while also smelling the faint smell of the burnt wood from the panel itself. The scarring of an otherwise traditional painting allows the work to communicate with the viewer in a manner that brings my questions to the forefront of this viewer's mind.

As I conceptualized the paintings, I realized another means of tying them together

would be to maintain the use of similar and repeating materials, poses and props that the figures interact with. After discussion with my thesis team, I chose to lean into the idea of the traditional colonial dinner table, to maintain the theme of consumerism throughout my work. The dinner table centers my paintings conceptually because of its cultural context. Historically, the dinner table is the core of consumerism within the western tradition. Breakfast, lunch, dinner, holidays, birthdays, funerals, practically every dynamic and momentous occasion is noted by interactions around the dinner table. Furthermore, the table is emblematic of the haves and have nots, who is served and who serves, who is at the head of the table, and who stays in the kitchen. The association between the table with nude black figures in the paintings creates a cohesive tether between the black body and its consumption, implying a cannibalistic relationship .

Body of Work

My final oil paintings were painted onto cradled panels, a preference that was both inspired by Jacob Lawrence's work, which was almost entirely panel, and my interest in harder surfaces to paint on. My first two paintings, *Servant* and *Severed*, are 24x18 inch oil paintings on cradled wood panels. Both explore how the black body is exploited and consumed within labor and reproductive laws and legislation.

Servant (1A) depicts a nude African-American woman, kneeling on an ornate red rug, while holding a silver platter in her lap that is filled with fruit, vegetables, cheese and other food. She is looking slightly upward at the viewer, staring at them. The wall behind her is a patchy textured green wall.

Severed (1B) holds similar features, the same model is in a similar position and composition. However in this piece the figure's lap is filled with a green cloth, and a pewter spoon is centered inside of it. The model is not looking directly at the viewer anymore, but is rather looking down at the spoon in her lap, with her hands resting behind her.

As a diptych, *Servant* is positioned to the right of *Severed*. This structure creates a sequence for the viewer, in which the figure goes from looking down and away from the viewer to looking directly at them. The upwards motion between the paintings lets the figure claim agency, as they directly confront the viewer, who initially has a seemingly voyeuristic view of the figure.

The confrontation caused by *Servant* is a central element to the viewers experience, as the diptych is designed to stimulate an inviting, but uneasy feeling for the. The colors in this piece are mostly complementary, the red and green elements make the pieces more aesthetically comfortable for the eye. On closer examination, however, the red of the carpet is more muted, and the green wall texture collapses into a series of patchy marks. Secondly, the faces shift from a more subtle and shy posure to a more direct and confrontational stance. Moving from *Severed* to *Servant*, the viewer, is made aware of their own voyeuristic experience. Lastly, the upfront nudity of the figure makes the viewer grapple with the western gaze on the black body.

Between the two, the most distinct differences are the facial expressions, and the materials in their laps. The spoon that the figure holds in *Severed* is a direct reference to the

research of J Marron Sims, a “scientist” from the 1800’s, whose research would act as the foundation for modern Gynecology. He would torture enslaved black women, dissecting them without offering anesthetic, believing both that it was a waste to use on a slave, and that black bodies were more tolerant to harm and abuse. Brynn Holland documents in his article *The ‘Father of Modern Gynecology’ Performed Shocking Experiments on Enslaved Women*, “While some doctors didn’t trust anesthesia, Sims’ decision to not use it—or any other numbing technique—was based on his misguided belief that Black people didn’t experience pain like white people did.” Among his barbaric practices, he would insert utensils like pewter spoons to the women's genitals. Several of his subjects died, and all of his victims were subject to inhumane abuse, all for the “advancement” of science. The actions of Sims and his peers normalized the medical and scientific consumption of the black body in our burgeoning nation, and laid the foundation for later abuses like the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment and the non-consensual use of the cells of Henrietta Lacks. It would also set a precedent for the black communities collective loss of autonomy in the areas of sex, reproduction, and health.

In *Severed*, the spoon in the figure’s lap, with the tip facing her reproductive system, references not only the actions taken on and against the black body, but ties the work further to the narrative of consumption. It continues my thesis’s conversation about the violation and abuse that western society inflicts on our bodies for its own profit.

The figure in *Servant* holds a platter of fruit, vegetables and cheeses on a silver platter. This prop, complemented by the figure’s positioning, explores the exploitation of the black body as a means of cultivating food and labor. The bounty she presents represents the collective subjugation of African-Americans, and nourishment the western world gains from it. The figure holding and providing a cornucopia of food that is not intended for her embodies the exploitative

dynamic of western capitalism. As an economic system, capitalism requires someone to be at the bottom, and our society has made it abundantly clear that the Black community is the base upon which our society grows fat.

Slavery, the Black Codes, Jim Crow, the war on crime, the war on drugs, police brutality, and the prison industrial complex, are all systemic endeavors that use the disenfranchisement and suffering of African-Americans for economic benefit. The economic advancement that comes from these structures has never held our benefit in mind, we were then, and now, considered to be a beast of burden.

My third piece, *At the Table* (1C), depicts the same figure sitting at a colonial dinner table. The ornate table surrounds her with a banquet of food, plates, glass and silverware. She is nude, similar to the previous pieces, however her body is mostly shielded by wine glasses and other aspects of the table. She looks forward, beyond the table, but not directly at the viewers gaze. She is poised, but not comfortable, there is a tension in the atmosphere.

At the Table grapples with the uneasy relationship the Black community has with modern commerce. Although increasingly we are able to engage with western capitalism as a means of gaining our own wealth, i.e. we can take a seat at the table, we are more vulnerable and bare in comparison to many of our non-black counterparts. As a work of art, *At the Table* seeks to depict the quiet tension of the black community's attempt to cultivate and consume within a culture that consumes us.

At several points in history, black communities have been able to gather wealth, status,

and economic stability, only for those efforts to be violently destroyed and undone by the actions of white supremacists. A commonly known historical example of this is the story of the Greenwood District of Tulsa, Oklahoma. Commonly known as “Black Wall Street,” it was home to a wealthy community of African-Americans. In 1921 after false rumors of sexual assault involving a black teenager and a white teenager, white militias used the opportunity to completely destroy the Greenwood District and massacre its Black population. As History.com Editors document in *Tulsa Race*

Massacre, “According to a later Red Cross estimate, some 1,256 houses were burned; 215 others were looted but not torched. Two newspapers, a school, a library, a hospital, churches, hotels, stores and many other Black-owned businesses were among the buildings destroyed or damaged by fire... A 2001 state commission examination of events was able to confirm 36 dead, 26 Black and 10 white. However, historians estimate the death toll may have been as high as 300.” Between events like the Tulsa Massacre, the Rosewood Massacre, and the systematic dismantling of community organizations like the Black Panther Party for Self Defense, the Black Community has spent generations attempting to financially empower itself, only for those efforts to be abruptly destroyed.

The final piece of this thesis is titled *Consume U.S.* (1D), and is an installation of a formally set dinner table with a colonial aesthetic. This table and its design is the same one depicted in *At the Table* and are used here to encourage a visual similarity that connects the pieces. The installation is designed with a collection of plates, platters, glasses, silverware and food to communicate feelings of comfort. It also works as a means of challenging the viewers perception of consumerism by bonding a commonly positive experience, gathering at the dinner table, with the challenging concepts presented in the several other pieces within this thesis. As a centerpiece, *Consume U.S.* personalizes the experience, by providing a literal space for consumption by the viewer, which emphasizes the themes of consumerism and exploitation

present in *Edible Negros*.

Conclusion

Edible Negros acts as a proper culmination of my thesis and my overall education in this MFA program. As an academic process, this thesis had many false starts, and several concepts too vast to completely depict within the scope of the project. Furthermore, the amount of research and the processes involved in the ideation dramatically shifted my artistic practice. Previously, I felt compelled to provide a specific and completely explored concept with all of my work. It seemed inappropriate to leave a project with more questions than answers. However, I find myself excited to explore further, and I leave this thesis with a more comfortable relationship with trial and error on the road to successful works of art.

There were many things I would have liked to have done differently, but the impact of Covid-19 and the necessary safety precautions resulted in different outcomes. Originally, I planned for things like additional models, and a more interactive experience with my installation. However, those limitations caused me to find creative solutions, and adapt my process to what was possible, leading to what I believe is my best work to date.

Politically, I believe Edible Negros only scratches the surface of its premise, and I find myself excited to continue exploring these themes as I continue my work after the MFA program. As my final work for this program, however, I believe it moves me further toward stronger and more robust political activism as an artist, and I hope it manages to encourage others to ask the same questions I have throughout this investigation. The thesis is complete, but it's motivating factors remain, and my continued exploration of them will be what

makes this thesis surpass the expectations I held for it and myself from the beginning. These thoughts are best embodied by a quote from Nato Thompson's book, *Seeing Power: Art and Activism in the 21st century*, where he speaks about his own experience with activism. "Time and time again, I have seen the potent merger of art and activism transform people's understanding of politics- and their relationship with the world around them... art activism has made itself felt in grand and bracing ways. To my mind, these moments... are proof that the role of culture must be taken seriously, and that deploying it for the needs for social change can produce wondrous results."

In the end, there is more to be done. More questions to explore, with revolutionary answers the wider world needs. *Edible Negros*, engages with the themes of oppression, liberation, and the friction between the two, and I believe it exist as a step forward toward empowering the Black community and the wider working class.



Servant (1A)



Severed (1B)



At the Table (1C)



Consume U.S. (1D)

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